



## BOOK REVIEW

---

Robert Gioielli, *Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014).

Charles M. Schultz's comic parable of Lucy and the football—Lucy perennially setting up the ball then invariably pulling it away just as Charlie Brown runs up to kick it—is a modern, dark twist on the Sisyphus myth. Virtually everyone identifies with Charlie Brown, but who exactly is Lucy and why does she do it? Specifically, if Charlie Brown might represent urban African Americans, who is it that's teasing with the football?

This thought came to mind while reading Robert Gioielli's terrific new study of environmentally oriented community political uprisings in older American cities in the second half of the 20th Century. Gioielli doesn't try to directly answer that question—it probably did not cross his mind—but his penetrating analysis of the agonies of cities, the rebellions of traditionally powerless people, and the strength and limits of environmental activism opens up enough avenues of thought to occupy historians—and, hopefully, stimulate the next generation of rebels—for decades to come.

*Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis* is the double-barreled story of people trying to save both cities (i.e., humans) and the environment (i.e., nature). Millions have called themselves environmentalists, and millions of others are urbanophiles, but the intersection of those two circles is small, particularly when it comes to the activists effecting change. With herculean effort it may be possible to redeem a city (say, the recent revitalizing of New York), and with similar effort it may be possible to rescue a corner of the environment (say, preventing the extinction of the whooping crane), but doing both—saving poor neighborhoods in Baltimore from destruction by a freeway network, saving black St. Louis babies from brain damage due to ingestion of lead paint, saving ethnic Chicago communities from the ravages of air pollution—is considerably more difficult.

These happen to be the three case histories that Gioielli, an assistant professor of history at University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College, digs into. All began as sparks of inchoate local concern in the mid-1960s, grew through well-organized resistance into high-profile battles around 1970, and had all run their course well before Ronald Reagan ushered in his counter-reformation in 1980.

The stories aren't as well known as they should be. (Spoiler alert: none has a Hollywood ending.) All are stirring, with sweeping tableaux of righteousness, anger, and courage, but in none was there a galvanizing Rosa Parks moment that forever changed the direction of the city. As Gioielli well articulates in his introductory and concluding chapters, the courtship between environmentalists and urbanists proved too difficult to consummate amid the cross-currents (and fraught histories) of African Americans, ethnic Americans, unionists, historic preservationists, and no-growthers. If, perhaps, there had been more time, more money, better facilitation, and less pushback from the corporations and their government defenders, an urban-environment coalition might have taken wing. As it was, it splintered like so much in America along largely racial lines—"environmentalism" for whites and "environmental justice" for blacks.

The stories, in a nutshell: In St. Louis, a group of black inner-city residents, after noisily protesting and staging rent strikes against rundown housing conditions, shifted to working in tandem with white scientists and lawyers to fight the problem of environmental disease from the ingestion of lead

paint chips. There was a heady sense of political power shifting, but in the context of St. Louis's massive depopulation and extremely low housing values, landlords couldn't comply and the effort failed.

In Baltimore, with a huge highway network plan hanging over their heads for decades like a cocked guillotine, several neighborhoods rose up in protest, first individually, then gradually in coordination. With colorfully angry acronyms like MAD (Movement Against Destruction), RAM (Relocation Action Movement) and SCAR (Southeast Council Against the Road), the effort ultimately contained enough racial and geographic diversity (and even money for lawsuits) to unglue the Maryland power structure and to eliminate many (but not all) of the planned road segments. It was a great victory, although pyrrhic in some places: several communities had been so eviscerated by highway planning, land condemnation, redlining, and disinvestment that they still haven't recovered today—a highway environmental catastrophe without even a highway.

In Chicago, the epicenter of urban community organizing because of the tutelage of Saul Alinsky and muckrakers like Studs Terkel and Mike Royko, the lead organization was Campaign Against Pollution (CAP, later renamed Citizen's Action Program) and the showdown started out over dirty and dangerous air. In a brilliant campaign that involved both political and anti-corporate tactics, CAP got the city to tighten its air regulations and forced the utility, Commonwealth Edison, to burn less unhealthy (and more expensive) low-sulfur coal. The group also helped kill a major expressway, but within a few years CAP's leadership had fractured, its internal coalition had imploded, and it was out of business.

The book doesn't read like fiction, but Gioielli's stories are lively and authoritative, and he has a good ear. The headings are catchy—"We Must Destroy You to Save You," "Will the War on Pollution End Up Like the War on Poverty?," "The Knee-in-the-Groin Approach"—and there are entertaining, enlightening snippets about many personalities, including Barry Commoner, Saul Alinsky, Mike Royko, a young Barbara Mikulski, and Ivory Perry, a lately resurrected icon of the environmental justice movement.

Frankly, each of these chapters merits an entire volume—there is much more to tell, and each of the battles has ramifications even today. But Gioielli's greater contribution is with his bookends, the lessons he pulls from the case histories, which open up many fine lines of thinking and exploration. Chapter 1 sets the scene with American cities' postwar decline (that he suggests should more properly be called a *destruction*, stemming as it did from conscious policies rather than random events) and how that left the black poor isolated in center-city slums amid an increasing array of toxins. Millions of words have been written on this topic, but few have described it from an environmental perspective.

Chapter 5 confirms that the grand urban–environmental alliance didn't succeed, and the conclusion, "Missed Opportunities," briefly explores why. Both of these cry out for more delving, but they do set a framework for other historians to mine this important topic. Gioielli postulates that 1979 was the high water mark for the environmental movement; among many events taking place that year was the City Care Conference, organized (in Detroit, ironically) by the Urban Environment Conference with strong support from the Sierra Club, the National Urban League, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The conference was a success, but few years could be as unpropitious as 1979 for any young initiative, with its high unemployment, high inflation, major oil shock, and unraveling of the promise of the Carter Administration. As so often happens, the prospective coalition partners retreated to their core missions—environmentalists to saving the larger, farther-away world, the urban poor to battling for justice in their neighborhoods.

The book ends in the 1970s, but of course the story continues. With many cities now turning around, the next volume of "Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis" would deal with some of the inequities as if through the looking-glass: gentrification and city parks, the collapse of celebrated suburbs, rising prices for water, and the obesity among the impoverished. Lucy has pulled the football away again—this time cities are getting better and the poor are being forced to leave.

As an incurable optimist, I think an urban–environmental coalition could work. Though not a natural alliance because of many different ideas about economic limits, growth, and redistribution,

I nevertheless think we can move in that direction and begin taking on some common opponents. Doing so, however, would involve absorbing the lessons of this book and also undertaking even more research into what happened the first time around.

And maybe, just maybe, Charlie Brown will get off a fabulous field goal before Lucy can pull away that football.

*Peter Harnik*  
Environmental Action  
peter.harnik@tpl.org

---